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SOCIAL NETWORKS AND URBAN POVERTY

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This paper investigates the role played by the social relationships of reciprocal exchange and mutual help in the struggle for the survival of the poorest sector of urban Latin American societies, particularly in in the mexican context. I discuss the conceptual definition of the social network, the factors that are involved in its formation and permanence, and the current debate in some Latin American academic circles about the role of the social networks in the fight against poverty. Also, I present the results of research that I have carried out since the early 90s in poor urban settlements in Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

Understanding current challenges in relation to the development of societies, especially those in Latin America, requires a consideration of various factors that influence the development and maintenance of social networks, which allow people to meet the many demands of daily life. I am specifically referring to the function of social relationships of reciprocal exchange and mutual help in the struggle for the survival of the poorest sectors of urban society.

To approach this topic, I will work with the conceptual definition of "social network" and with factors involved in its formation and permanence. Later, I will discuss the current debate in some Latin American academic circles about the role of social networks in the fight against poverty. I will contribute to this discussion beginning with results from research conducted since the early 1990s in poor urban settlements in Mexico.

SOCIAL NETWORKS: CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION AND FACTORS INVOLVED IN ITS CONSOLIDATION

The concept of social network has recently been approached by various authors.[1] For Sluzki (1995 and 1996), the social and cultural context in which the social subject is found, determines to a large extent its relational uni-

[1] A broader review of this topic is found in: Enriquez, R. 2000. Redes sociales y pobreza: Mitos y Realidades. [Social networks and poverty: Myths and Realities.] En Revista de Estudios de Genero: La ventana # 11. [Magazine of Gender Studies: The window # 11] University of Guadalajara. Mexico.

verse. The personal social network of the individual can be defined as the sum of all the relationships that a subject perceives as significant, or defines as differentiated from the anonymous mass of the society. To explore the social network of an individual means to know and analyze the different links that he or she develops in each of the spaces of daily interaction: the family, relationships with friends, coworkers, schoolmates, the community and of services or beliefs. Lomnitz (1975), emphasizes reciprocity as a central linking element and defines the social network as a set of relationships of mutual exchange of goods and services in a specific social space. The author classifies the networks as *egocentric* when the inquiry is about all the links with which the ego reciprocally exchanges goods and services; and as *exocentric*, when what is relevant is not the exchange that a subject establishes with others, but what is created among different subjects that share a specific social space.

Gonzalez de la Rocha (1986), Estrada (no date), and Lomnitz (1975), also approach the typology of the social network in regard to the relational characteristics among individuals, in terms of hierarchy. *Horizontal networks* are maintained on the basis of kinship and are developed among subjects that share similar social and economic conditions. For Lomnitz (1975), kinship offers a concrete cultural dimension where members share values and norms that govern and give meaning to social and mutual exchange processes. *Vertical networks*, in contrast to horizontal networks, are developed from links that are built with different formal sectors of society.

Similarly, one also speaks of *informal networks* or *blurred borders* (Dabas, 1993); that is, exchange and mutual help networks in which there are no preset contracts and where a fundamental factor is the absence of calculations (Godelier, 1998). These are networks consisting of close relatives, neighbors, and friends, that through the mutual exchange of goods and services, interweave and nurture their links. Therefore, *formal networks* or networks with *defined borders* (Dabas, 1993), would be those that the individual, the family or a specific social group establishes with the formal sectors of society. These relationships tend to be impersonal and hierarchical; the reciprocity factor is not the ingredient that supports the existence and permanence of these types of social links.

For Dabas (1993), the concept of social *network* involves a permanent building process, both individually and collectively. It is an open system by means of a *dynamic exchange* among its members and with members of other social groups, which allows the multiplication of resources that one owns and that is enriched with the various relationships among the different members that belong to it. Gonzalez de la Rocha (1999a) and Abello and

Madariaga (1997) as well as Dabas (1993) emphasize the need to understand social networks as dynamic processes through time and specific social circumstances. Finally, for Bronfman (1993), the concept of social network is used mostly to refer to social situations in which non-institutional exchanges are observed. The purpose of this conceptual and methodological tool is based on the possibility of detecting events and interactions of individuals and groups that make it easier for the latter to have the opportunity of facing together the various demands of daily life, such as: child care, financial problems, help during critical events, moral and emotional support, etc.

For Lomnitz (1975), as well as for authors including: Gonzalez de la Rocha (1986), Bazan (1998), and Bronfman (1993). in social networks there are four fundamental factors that regulate the intensity of established links: a) *social distance.* According to each social-cultural group, there are preset guidelines regarding what can be expected and exchanged in a specific relationship; for instance, the type of implicit contracts between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, brothers and sisters, godfathers and godmothers, female and male friends, which vary significantly from one culture to another. b) *physical distance.* The physical neighborhood, especially in poor communites, plays a fundamental role so that mutual help and exchange relationships can exist. In this sense, kinship links by themselves do not guarantee an adequate performance of social networks when there is physical distance. c) *Economic distance.* The existence of similar social and economic conditions is a relevant factor for the operation of reciprocal exchange networks. When economic mobility occurs for one of the members of the social network, this factor predisposes to an asymmetric exchange relationship, and the link tends to deteriorate or disappear because there is no longer an equality of conditions, of deprivations and of needs. d) *Psychological distance.* This refers mainly to the psycho-social element known as *trust*; that is, the willingness and disposition to start and maintain a relationship of mutual help between two people. Trust involves familiarity, physical closeness and the knowledge of the needs and resources of the others.

The *connectivity* of the social network has been another element approached by various authors. Bott (1980) defines connectivity as the degree in which the people known by a family interact with each other and get together among themselves independently of the family. In this sense, the scattered network is based on the existence of few links among the different members of the network. Thus, a very connected network would be characterized by an increase in the links that unite the different people that

make up the network of an individual or a family. These same contents are discussed by Turner (1980), who characterizes social networks according to their *internal weaving*: open weaving networks (low connectivity), average weaving networks (middle connectivity) and closed weaving networks (high connectivity).

A central factor that nurtures and maintains an active social network is *reciprocity* among the members that make up this social fabric. For Lomnitz (1994), the ways in which people reciprocate among themselves are strongly determined by the "trust" factor, which in turn is influenced by cultural variables (social distance), physical variables (closeness to the places of residence) and economic variables that determine the intensity of the exchange. For this author, the degree of trust in a relationship varies in time and depends primarily on the existence of values and norms shared among those who establish the social link. In the same way, "… the closeness factor becomes an essential component of trust; closeness stimulates and distance inhibits trust" (1994:86). However, Lomnitz argues that when neighbors in a specific marginal town come from different regions or various social-cultural classes, the possibilities of establishing relationships of intimate trust are fewer.

For Gonzalez de la Rocha (1999a), the reciprocity factor allows the continuity and permanence of social relationships. "To reciprocate a favor, some help, the support received in a difficult moment or at any moment in the daily life is, in fact, to let the door open for the relationship; not to reciprocate implies the opposite" (1999a: 16). Moreover, she discusses the importance of understanding the principle of reciprocity in specific contexts in which the same goods and services are not necessarily exchanged, and where timeliness for the reciprocal act allows some flexibility in regard to the immediacy or the long-term, as is the case of the moral duty of children to their parents when the latter grow old.

Estrada (no date) agrees to a large extent with Gonzalez de la Rocha (1999a) in regard to the central role played by reciprocity in social networks. Both mention the real costs involved in remaining in a network, especially in contexts of labor exclusion. In this sense, the relationships of mutual exchange simultaneously constitute a burden and a protection for the individuals and the families. When the possibilities of reciprocating are exhausted, the relationships become fragile and the individuals are more vulnerable. Lomnitz (1994) presents the existence of three response patterns when the *exchange* in a social network becomes *asymmetric*: a pattern of rural origin that resolves the asymmetry through the redistribution in the form of "alcohol". An intermediate pattern that involves the emergence of the

"cacique", the leader of the neighborhood with the role of mediator between the country and the city. Lastly, a pattern of breakage of the link and membership into new networks.

Godelier (1998) also comments on the concept of reciprocity and considers that giving involves a double relationship between the one who gives and the one who receives what is given. On the one hand, it is a relationship of solidarity in which one shares with another what one has. On the other hand, it is a relationship of superiority because the one who receives the gift becomes indebted to the one who grants the gift. In this way, the gift simultaneously unites and separates. For the author, the debt (the separation) seems to have greater consequences in the social life of individuals.

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND URBAN POVERTY: THE MYTH OF SURVIVAL

The role played by social networks in the struggle for survival has been examined by various authors recent decades. The central question posed by Lomnitz (1975), when she conducted research in the 1970s with marginal urban groups in Mexico City was: "what are the mechanisms that allow millions of Latin Americans, specifically orphans with no social protection, to survive in neighborhoods, in spite of an obvious lack of savings and abilities to earn a living in an urban industrial environment?" (1994: 48). Her central response to that query is that: "… the exchange networks developed by the inhabitants, … constitute an effective mechanism to supply the lack of financial security that prevails in the neighborhood …" (1994: 48).

Twenty five years have passed in the lives of many poor, urban Mexicans since Lomnitz investigated this issue. Although the question still has a relevant social value, the conclusive response to which Lomnitz arrived in the 70s has been surpassed to a large extent by the social reality that millions of poor families continue to live, in extreme poverty in the metropolitan areas of our country, and in Latin America in general.

Lomnitz's work (1975), "Condor's Street" presents a valuable platform of information and analysis, which describes the problem of urban poverty from a perspective of the *resources* and *capabilities* that the urban poor have to survive in conditions of exclusion and marginality, leaving aside approaches centered in the analysis of *lacks* and the *absences* with which others had tried to understand the phenomenon of poverty at that time.

Many social researchers (Garcia and de Oliveira, 1994; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1986 and 1994; Abello, Madariaga and Hoyos, 1997; Chiarelo, 1994; among others) throughout the years have contributed to the research begun

by Lomnitz (1975). They have found in social networks of reciprocal exchange and mutual help, one of the most successful survival strategies when one is poor in the city.

However, the economic crises that several Latin American countries, and specifically Mexico, have experienced in recent decades, have had a significant impact on the social and material conditions in the lives of many urban poor individuals. The continuous poverty process has weakened the possibilities of effective reciprocal exchange when one lives in labor exclusion contexts and when public services and social security do not reach those in greatest need.

When facing this reality, new approaches have appeared, which attempt to confront and to put on the discussion agenda, the current validity of the thesis that presents mechanisms of reciprocal exchange and mutual help, as successful strategies to reduce the problem of poverty in marginal urban towns.

Gonzalez de la Rocha (1999 a and b) has pointed out the erosion process of support systems in contexts of labor exclusion. The author comments that in the 1980s, the role of social and reciprocal exchange networks became more important as mechanisms to reduce the impact of poverty. However, crises and economic restructuring of the 1990s have produced a situation in which "the family, as the entity that solves the problems of lack, has gone through changes in its organization and in its ability to respond with its traditional survival strategies" (1999[a]: 20). The central argument of the author questions the current possibilities of *reciprocal exchange* that involves costs in terms of time, availability, and especially a material investment in goods as well as services; in contexts of low employment and the intensification of poverty. The few resources of the urban poor hinder the possibility of reciprocating the favors and support received. The lack of a minimum capital necessary to ensure and maintain membership in the social network, has resulted in situations of social isolation that leave many urban poor households in conditions of vulnerability and social neglect. The author points out the importance of carrying out new research that allows us to examine more comprehensively the social contexts and family scenarios that allow the current maintenance of the mechanisms of reciprocity and mutual help; and which are others that endanger the possibility of reciprocating the goods and services received.

Estrada (no date) analyzes the impact of the 1995 Mexican crisis in domestic groups of the poor urban sector, which had already suffered a significant impoverishing process in previous years. The author, like Gonzalez de la Rocha (1999 a and b), questions the possibilities of social exchange that are

based on the "reciprocity" mechanism when resources are depleted. "The social networks in general, but especially the family ones, faced very serious limits in their capacity to provide support. When money and work become scarce, the basis of this relationship was under pressure from two sides. On the one hand, there were fewer and fewer goods that could be distributed among the relatives, while on the other hand, the needs kept increasing without stopping" (no date: 90). The author illustrates in detail the ways in which mutual help among relatives began to be conditioned: in several cases housing was shared but food was no longer shared, contributions for payments of education and medical expenses stopped, and informal credits and loans decreased significantly. For Estrada, the effects of the impossibility of maintaining reciprocal exchange that had been practiced previously, are not only impacting material conditions in the lives of the urban poor, but also the social and cultural patterns that underlie the logic of exchange and solidarity. The limitation of resources experienced by many poor urban households at this time, is also producing new patterns of family, domestic and social behavior.

Bazan (1998) analyzes social and economic dynamics that have resulted in the weakening of extended family units (enlarged and trigenerational) and the gathering of the nuclear family, since the 1980s. "Massive unemployment had an impact in an element that seemed untouchable: the solidarity of the extended and trigenerational family. The nuclear families got together and collaboration inside each one of them became very intense, at the expense of the extended family relationship. Women left their houses in order to get jobs and children began participating in productive activities. The relationships with the extended family were weakened and tainted with anger and resentment. The extended family left its place to the nuclear family".

The author analyzed the impact of the 1995 crisis in Mexican families, which had already undergone a process of becoming more nuclear. The household diversified its functions to give place to productive as well as reproductive tasks. Many men lost their jobs and this involved a readjustment in the spaces, times and habits inside the households to allow for an increased presence of males. Women suffered a greater overload and the working days were doubled and tripled. Many children left school and got informal jobs. This family situation based on "survival agreements" (1998: 11) produced stressed relationships inside nuclear families. Conflicts regarding forced participation in order to survive resulted in serious desertion and confrontations among the various members of the domestic group. In view of this context, the author considers that the family relationships centered in

the kinship unit are becoming production oriented units, which result in important family degradation processes.

Salazar (1996). has studied links outside the households, which women, who reside in poor settlements in the urban outskirts of Mexico City, establish and maintain throughout time. The author has found, as Bazan (1998) did, conflictive family situations in which reciprocal exchange and mutual help are far from being what Lomnitz (1975) found on Condor Street years before. Moreover, geographic distance, which resulted from moving, has deeply affected the possibilities of maintaining significant links for many of the women who were interviewed. Currently, the lack of attachment to an area and the presence of various urban location factors, make it very difficult to develop social networks.

Salazar (1996) mentions an important point about trust, a basic element in mutual help networks: it seems that, due to mistrust, the women prefer to solve their daily problems in an independent and self-sufficient way, and to establish defined spatial limits in order to avoid social closeness. The links among female neighbors are few and in many cases, just good manners. The author suggests that the impoverishment of support and solidarity networks may be related to the processes of urban consolidation in the neighborhoods. When the necessary public services or utilities have been obtained, the level of participation among the neighbors tends to diminish. Moreover, the shared urban space becomes a scenario of encounters, where the daily demands are resolved independently and inside each of the households. Mogrojevo (1997) who participated in a study on poverty, life and health conditions in Mexico City, comments on the symbolic role represented by the house in the life of the women and their families. Having a house means the possibility of breaking the dependency links with parents in law and other relatives. In this sense, the women prefer independence even if their living conditions and the quality of links with their nearest social environment become worse.

Pucci (1993), as well as Salazar (1996), also consider the role played by urban consolidation processes in maintaining and strengthening social and solidarity networks. Dabas (1993), who analyzes the social networks in the Argentinean urban population, studies in depth the importance of building "new territories". Factors related to *migration* and constant urban relocation have resulted in serious breakage in the social networks of the urban poor, such that social links are disappearing. Casteus (in D., 1993) labels this phenomenon of exclusion and social isolation as the *dissociation* zone, which occurs before the *vulnerability zone* where labor fragility and weaker social support appear. Similarly, Sluzki (1996) who works with Latin populations

that immigrate into the United States, considers that the migration phenomenon impacts and changes the network. During a significant length of time, the new network will likely be smaller, will show a more irregular distribution, will have a lower density and a more narrow repertory of functions; it will also be less reciprocal and intense. All this is characteristic of an insufficient network that consequently tends to be overloaded and imbalanced, and contributes to individual and family crises, and a constant atmosphere of stress and exhaustion.

In view of this context, resulting from migration and the constant changes of location in urban areas, Dabas (1993) emphasizes the importance of facilitating the development of new networks (new territories) that include on the one hand, what remains of previous networks and on the other hand, the creation of new links with those who share the same needs and the same geographical space.

When we analyze the current composition of poor urban settlements, we find a social behavior that no longer corresponds to those massive invasions of small groups that gradually assumed ownership of public land. In the 1990s, specifically after the 1995 Mexican crisis, we found in marginal urban settlements ant-like occupation strategies. These strategies refer to individuals moving towards irregular spaces with the main purpose of getting a land lot and to stop paying constantly increasing rents. This type of gradual and individual occupation greatly hinders association possibilities among neighbors. Collective initiatives for social action to get public services and to legalize the land become unattainable tasks, surpassing the possibilities of a social fabric that is starting and has been broken many times due to continuous urban movements. This is illustrated in the following field quote:

> … well frankly, there is a lot of distrust, I simply greet and no more, the people don't trust anymore. And this is because with so many thefts and so many marijuana smokers, one doesn't know. And if I sometimes talk with one of my female neighbors, the one who I know a little, well, one doesn't walk into the houses anymore, one stays at the door. And it is because one imagines that if they get into one's house, they are just seeing what one has and then one imagines that later they can steal the things that one has. I don't trust anybody in spite of the fact that I already have been six years here (…) and it is because we have already lived in so many areas of the city and I rather just navigate with my husband and with my daughters (Field Diary, November 2000, conversations with Cecilia, young woman and mother of a family in the growth stage, who resides in an irregular settlement in the outskirts of the Guadalajara metropolitan area, Mexico).

The economic crises experienced in Mexico have had serious consequences on the well-being of poor urban households, and in the possibilities that they have to establish the necessary conditions that allow the development of solidarity. Unstable employment and the lack of resources have forced many families to send to the job market more than one wage earner, mainly women and children. When one lives in a context of unsatisfied basic needs, the time factor has special meaning. The current urban poor use each hour of the day to ensure for survival, there is no real time for association and social action in the habitat.

Careful examination of the irregular settlements in the large cities means facing social and economic reality that maintains objective differences from poor populations of previous decades. While existing resources in terms of human capital have not meant a upward social mobility, social capital (in terms of social networks) has suffered significant losses, which have been increased by the problems of insecurity and mistrust. Moreover, separation between the dwelling space and the productive space has resulted in more unstable employment and social isolation.

The evidence, resulting from ethnographic work in marginal urban settlements in Mexico, has shown us how mostly women are going through restrictive adjustments of the household's resources and their placement in the informal labor market (in agreement with Moser, 1996). Women are the ones facing the current crisis, in an important way. This situation has produced extreme conditions in the lives of many women. Work overload, concern regarding the lack of food for their children, the need to look for external income, preoccupation about the children when one goes out to work, accumulated fatigue and stress day after day, and tensions with the partner when the woman is the primary wage earner, are only some examples of this reality.

When analyzing the characteristics of women's economic participation in contexts of urban poverty, we find points of tension. I am referring to the disassociation among three areas; the productive space, the dwelling space, and the space of development and consolidation of social networks in poor urban settlements in today's Mexico. For Escobar (2001), the transition in large cities such as Guadalajara, Mexico, from a model centered on the trades to an assembly plant model, has brought important consequences to the household and social dynamics of the poor urban population. The trade model grouped various family members and offered work opportunities for each one of them, as well as the possibility that the sons got involved in traditional workshops with neighbors or relatives. Also, the family father was able to participate both in formal employment and activities on his own,

and the mother actively participated in the development of the family business. In contrast, the assembly plant model is centered on the activities of large businesses; the workers cannot become owners in any way, nor can they control productive processes. The relationships built through family businesses and workshops become less important, and thus a privileged space for the consolidation and permanence of solidarity and reciprocal exchange networks disappear.

Throughout recent decades these economic transformations produced a wide and growing gap between production spaces and dwelling spaces. Many families moved from downtownareas to the city outskirts. The possibility of having a business that would employ family members was no longer a feasable alternative, in view of the social and economic changes and the arrival of large industries to the regions. Moreover, constant urban movements experienced by many poor men and women in search of a physical space to live without having to pay high rents, has resulted in serious breakage in the social networks that had been built during the years living among relatives and neighbors. Large groups of families that moved collectively were disappearing. In their place, the urban movement of isolated families with a nuclear structure toward irregular settlements in the outskirts of the large cities, became more intense (Enriquez, 1998 and Enriquez and Aldrete, 1999).

The labor and social consequences of these structural adjustments have been especially dramatic for poor urban women. These women have little capital, without the presence of labor markets near the spaces of residence. In addition, social links that allow informal negotiations needed to meet the demands of the household were breaking down. Access to the formal market was weakened, and unstable economic activities in the informal sector (in a saturation process) have been the only option for most of these women. To this context is added the withdrawal of the State from its social security functions and more specifically, from the housing programs that were previously offered (Ramirez Saiz, 1993 and 1995; Morfin and Sanchez, 1985). Similarly, the main role of the Church in this type of urban settlement, which aided the reconstruction of the social fabric and provided space density, no longer has the same influence that it had in previous decades. Also, the current crisis of the patriarchal family has shown the difficulty faced by men to continue their role as the only wage earners (Castells, 2000).

Support and mutual help networks are part of the social imagination that the urban poor build in the search for well-being. However, at this time, these possibilities of association and solidarity exchange are not sufficiently present as real resources in the struggle for the survival of the urban poor.

Zaffarony (1999), Gonzalez de la Rocha (1999a), Moser (1996), Kaztman (1999) and Roberts (1995) have questioned the current capacity of social support networks as resources to combat economic hardship. What are factors underlying the defficultly of maintaining the social fabric that aids survival? Low salaries, unemployment and unstable employment have reduced the possibilities of keeping an effective membership in that social fabric that lessens the decay of social conditions (Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1999[a]). However, there are other factors that have an important influence, on survival, such as the social phenomenon that label urban mistrust. The social building of trust in the city has suffered strong blows in recent years. The psychological closeness that allows empathy with someone else and the material and symbolic exchange have been broken in several areas: the frontal fight against others in order to get a land lot; the weakening of significant social links due to constant changes of residence within the urban environment; the lack or resources to actively maintain the existing links; the uncontrollable arms of urban violence, which find fertile ground in those who are most unprotected; and the overwhelming appearance of drug consumption and sale, have produced an atmosphere of daily suspicion about the real intentions of others.

To characterize the social networks in poor urban towns has been one of our objectives in recent studies (Enriquez, 1998 and Aguiar and Medrano, 1999). The evidence points to the reduction of the network's size. When the question refers specifically to the availability of financial support through the existing networks, the network shows its greatest contraction. The social networks are predominantly feminine and are mostly located in the section that concentrates kinship links; mainly those that involve relationships in the framework of the nuclear domestic organization. An obvious and worrisome absence is the reduction of significant relationships with neighbors and supports that reflect exchange of goods and services with them.

The wear and tear of the social networks, specifically those that are constructed from relationships with relatives, is undeniable. Family relationships are experiencing the consequences of a State that has, recently, transferred a series of functions and responsibilities, which have surpassed the actual capabilities of the families. This situation has resulted in scenarios where the families are at the limit of their possibilities to survive and to stay barely connected to a broken social fabric. Such is the case of the resulting combination of the three following factors: aging, social networks, and poverty. The increase of single-person households where older people live, having lost the links that they constructed throughout their lives, and where the long-term reciprocity (from children to parents, from grandchildren to

grandparents) is no longer guaranteed at present; as well as the possibility of caring the life through the neighbors' charity; have at present resulted in social isolation processes.

Finally, the creation of new territories (Dabas, 1993) implies building a solidarity that commits the various social actors who are involved. Social networks are always dynamic processes, evidently sensitive to greater economic changes; borders in these networks warn about the deep exhaustion of the links.

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